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ABSTRACT

A shift from a classroom focus on persuasion and argumentation to a broader classroom focus on the communication of controversy might be beneficial to students. The course content should help students come to grips with their internal and external problems, rather than avoid them and seek only quick solutions. To aid students in dealing with controversies, teachers must introduce them to the verbal and nonverbal uses of language and to the communication process. In carrying out a program based on this concept, the school should offer a broadened and more interpersonalized approach to teaching persuasion and debate. First, students should understand the meaning of communication and examine why people argue. Then they should focus on the uses of arguments in their own interpersonal relationships. Students should learn not only to analyze, share, and defend their own views, but also to listen to and respect others' positions. They should notice what motivates people to meet in groups to which they belong and should be able to identify the kinds of controversies in problem solving group settings and public communication. Preparing students to use language effectively in communicating to solve problems should be the main purpose of this course, regardless of the focus. (SW)

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TEACHING COMMUNICATION IN CONTROVERSY IN THE SECONDARY SCHOOL

by

Joanne Gurry*

Traditionally secondary school courses in persuasion and argumentation have used a public speaking and debate format. Students analyze speeches, learn the elements of persuasion, develop logical arguments and appealing style, while engaged in the delivery of public speeches and the clash of debate. This orientation is valuable and enjoyable for some of our students, but the experience of a controversy or an argument is not limited to the activities of public speaking or debating. In fact, since controversies develop all day from the intrapersonal to the mass media levels of communication, persuasive public speaking and debate are probably the least frequent forms which students employ in argument. In addition, students involved in controversies have not always used the spoken or written word as their medium. It is more often action, symbolic demonstrations of their positions, which either accompanies or replaces speaking. Consequently, what secondary school students should learn about communication used in controversy bears reconsideration. A shift from a classroom focus on persuasion and argumentation to a broader classroom focus on the communication of controversy might be more helpful to more of our students.

Dealing constructively with conflicts when they occur within us, experiencing significant differences of opinion with others in formal or informal settings, or formulating positions on various public issues are all integral parts of "becoming," of growing and maturing. Adolescents, especially, must deal with a swirl of conflicts and contradictions in and around them. Teaching them to come

to grips effectively with internal or external problems, not to avoid them and not to seek only quick and facile solutions is one of the teacher's most important responsibilities. As speech communication teachers it is critical that we recognize students, not merely as public speakers, but as language users communicating to solve problems. In assisting students to deal with controversies that arise from problems, we must introduce them to the verbal and nonverbal uses of language and to the communication processes.

Marshfield High School has recently introduced a program based on these concepts. The program begins with a basic understanding of what communication is and moves to a consideration of controversy in interpersonal, group, and public communication levels. The following description offers a comprehensive selection of "material to be covered" within the restrictions of many secondary school communication curricula. The intention here, however, is not merely to prescribe a series of specific units for study, but to offer a broadened and more "interpersonalized" approach to the teaching of persuasion and debate in high school.

What is Communication?

First, students should understand what communication means. Essentially, they should recognize that communication is a two way process of sharing meanings, and they should discover the various factors (and their relationships) that bring about shared meanings. The use of communication models introducing such terms as sender, message, medium, encoding, decoding, feedback, etc., is most effective here. Having broken down the single term communication into many of its parts and processes, the students should have a keener awareness of the complexity of the term and a better appreciation for where the system can break down or where barriers exist to the realization of shared meanings. Being able to spot possible origins of communication problems before engaging in communication can be

effective in helping to reduce the occurrence, of problems. For example, when students realize that the message they encode may not be the same message that their receiver decodes because of differences in perception, they can begin to adapt their messages to their audiences.

To reinforce the applicability of models of communication, students can apply them to their own examples of conflict or controversy. As senders of messages, students should make an honest attempt to study how their own language or nonverbal behavior might either cause or aggravate a disagreement unnecessarily. As receivers, they should begin to understand how their own perceptual filters sometimes cause them to block out or to misinterpret other persons' points of view.

Basic to an understanding of communication is the realization that communication is both a verbal and nonverbal process and that messages are being sent not only by words, but also by a whole host of other behaviors having to do with vocal cues, gestures, posture, appearance, facial expression, and spatial arrangements. Students should become especially sensitive to the old notion that it might not be what was said that caused an argument, but simply how it was said. Cognizant of nonverbal behavior and strategies, students should begin to recognize probable effects of these strategies on audiences, and as senders and receivers, they should begin to use such behavior constructively.

Students familiar with verbal communication should clearly understand that "meanings are in people, not in words." They should realize the dangers of stereotyping and categorizing through labels that evaluate, and they should learn to employ descriptive language to produce greater understanding.

Communication necessitates being "other directed," or receiver oriented. It is important that students learn to view language as a tool for reaching common understandings with a receiver. By considering the experience and attitudes of a given audience and modifying their semantic and overall verbal strategies to suit their audiences, students begin to practice audience adaptation and to become receiver oriented.

These fundamental concepts of communication can be taught through case studies of communication breakdowns, through the students' own observations and reports of communication situations, or through the analysis of persuasive speeches. Regardless of the specific materials or approach used, the emphasis should be on the uses of language to create shared meanings and to promote mutually satisfying solutions to problems.

Interpersonal Communication

After this introduction, the class should begin to focus on the uses of arguments in their own interpersonal relationships. A sensible starting point is to examine why people argue. Students should discover the psychological needs, topics, and issues that most frequently motivate arguments, and they should examine the positions that they take. Such an investigation should be broadened to a consideration of the entire range of positions possible on a given topic and to an appreciation of the experiences, readings, people or other factors that have influenced the formulation of their own and others' values. In an attempt to define their own patterns of argument and value structures even further, students might identify issues they would publicly defend, privately believe, or not care about at all. They might also consider the effect that disclosure of their positions on controversial topics has on them and on their positions.

Through practice in hypothetical situations, students should become more skillful in avoiding

pitfalls in their own interaction. Through case studies, role playing, and original dialogues, they might examine the use and effects of defensive strategies, "allness thinking," "either or thinking," making inferences, using evaluative language and other factors that often contribute to everyday arguments or cause deadlocks in discussions.

Students should learn not only to analyze, share, and defend their own views, but to listen to and respect others' positions. Both teacher and students must realize that while class discussions which touch on moral, social, political, or religious issues can be stimulating, they can also be threatening. Students must respect the uniqueness and integrity of what others say in the class, and they must also respect the right of others to keep certain views private. The purpose of this unit is not to force self disclosure, but simply to allow students to understand themselves and others as communicators better and to apply this information constructively to the discussion of issues which inspire controversy and disagreement. Learning in an environment of respect should not only create openness, it should also insure privacy.

Group Communication

After having explored interpersonal communication, students are ready to investigate controversies in problem solving group settings. Students should be asked to note what motivates people to meet in groups, to observe the functions of the groups to which they belong, and to identify the kinds of controversies that most often emerge. The class should investigate various group leadership styles such as laissez-faire, democratic, and authoritarian, and they should consider the effects of these styles on providing solutions to problems. The students

should recognize that different group functions such as brainstorming, consensus reaching, and problem solving necessitate their use of specific and suitable processes and techniques. Students should closely examine the roles one might play as a group member and determine how each role might promote the discovery of solutions. Finally, students should participate in problem solving groups, observe others in groups, and report on their experiences and observations. Situations that will drastically polarize students should be avoided. The purpose of this unit is not to confront students with deeply personal matters, but to allow them to enjoy a structured learning situation in which they can try out new communication skills in problem solving. The problems that the class works on should be meaningful, but not so explosive or personal that they see only what they are talking about and not the verbal and nonverbal processes they are using to solve the problem.

Public Communication

In public communication, students should again consider what motivates people to protest grievances publicly, to advocate causes, or to seek partisans. They should study the nature and kinds of propositions, uses of evidence, reasoning, fallacies, propaganda, and emotional appeals. The events of the past several years have provided us with many contemporary examples of both speakers and issues for study here. But beyond the analysis of speeches by public rhetors, students should research, write and deliver their own persuasive speeches.

No study of public persuasive communication would be complete without introducing students to a consideration of a general paradigm of the growth and development of protest movements. A thoughtful study should establish a clear understanding that persuasive speeches are rarely isolated acts; they are most often parts of larger action to persuade a defined population. The study should not only

include analysis of speeches, but also consideration of the significance of nonverbal strategies, such as mass demonstrations, and the uses of the mass media in broadcasting both verbal and nonverbal messages.

Students must study persuasive public speaking in a broad context, not merely as an isolated verbal or logical exercise. Students should see persuasive speaking as an act most often related to the larger action of the growth and decline of a cause or movement and as an act both protected by and circumscribed by legal sanctions.

Summary

If we are concerned with public misuse of language, of communication, and of law, then our courses should reflect these concerns and deal with students not as "speakers," but as language users communicating to solve problems. And if we are concerned with public communication, then we must also be concerned with everyday abuses of language and communication that occur when people fail to understand how communication principles and language can be used to prevent or resolve a controversy.

Although the entire scope of the content outlined here is broad, the student as language user communicating to solve problems is the real "material" for the course whether the actual focus is on the interpersonal, group, or public communication levels. While recognizing this fundamental concept of student as language user, it is clear that it may not be possible to implement the whole program within the various restrictions of secondary school curricula. The concept can be applied, however, to even the most traditional courses. Here we find our challenge. This approach taken as a whole, however, will provide a broader range of verbal and nonverbal experiences by which students come to a better understanding of communication, more mature solutions to problems, and more satisfying human relationships.

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